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SUBJECT: JORDANIAN RESPONSE TO GME INITIATIVE: U.S.

CREDIBILITY LOW BUT PROPSALS NOT TOO BAD

REF: SECSTATE 86312

SUMMARY

1. (U) In response to ref, Post solicited feedback from our interlocutors within the GOJ, academia, and the NGO community about the G-8 Greater Middle East Initiative papers. The response was generally favorable, but activists cautioned that implementation will be difficult given low U.S. credibility in the region related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Iraq. That said, all agreed that G-8 sponsorship for a regional reform initiative would make it less controversial than U.S. sponsorship. Our contacts commended the inclusion of references to previous Arab reform documents as a way to show how the GMEI complements regional efforts, and offered suggestions to counter criticism that it is being imposed from "outside." Activists appreciated the effort to involve representatives from all sectors of society, and cautioned against letting resistant governments make excuses to stall reform. They suggested that coordinating through the G-8 would also help eliminate redundancies in regional reform programming and funding, as well as connect like-minded activists with a view to increasing cooperation and replicating successful approaches. End Summary.

SUGGESTIONS TO ENHANCE GMEI'S REGIONAL FLAVOR

2. (U) Interlocutors from the GOJ, NGO community, and academia offered suggestions to further enhance the Greater Middle East Initiative's (GMEI) "regional flavor" and counter criticism that the ideas are being imposed from the "outside." A senior GOJ official who read the papers said that the initiative's inclusion of language from previous Arab documents on civil society and democratic development, including the Alexandria Library, Arab Business Council, and Sana'a Declaration, was a positive way to highlight the fact the GMEI is building on regional reform efforts. He said that the Arab League should take a similar approach when they meet in May to devise an Arab reform document.

3. (U) Regarding the idea of allocating funding through a board of directors, one contact proposed selecting "credible" intellectuals from the region to serve on the board. He also suggested that the G-8 publicize the meetings held in Arab countries with local activists (such as the roundtable discussion in Amman with U/S Grossman) to show that the USG indeed is making the effort to consult, not impose.

4. (U) They believe the proposed Foundation for Democracy could select the most appropriate models of democratic institutions that exist in Europe, the U.S. and other countries to follow in the Middle East (e.g. parliamentary as opposed to presidential government, or French versus Anglo-Saxon legal or educational traditions). A professor of political science suggests creating equivalent bodies on the regional and national levels that can connect more effectively to all levels of the population and advance democratic tenets in a country-specific and culturally sensitive manner.

ACTIVISTS LAUD ALL-INCLUSIVE APPROACH

5. (U) Interlocutors roundly applauded the proposals' efforts to include government, business, and civil society representatives in developing and implementing the initiative. With regard to the Forum for the Future, activists emphasized that no one sector should dominate, and government in particular should not be allowed to veto or stymie progress in "sensitive" areas such as press freedoms and women's rights. One suggestion is to hold in parallel to the G-8 a conference of civil society groups from the region and democracy NGOs from the G-8 countries, which could then compare initiatives and assessments of progress towards democratization.

16. (U) Our contacts also approve of the effort to coordinate donor support among G-8 members. "There is too much money flying around in different directions" which is funding often redundant projects, according to one activist. With regard to the Democracy Assistance Group, the NGO representatives like the idea of a clearing house which would ensure donors are not double-funding the same project. They also support creating a data bank which would register projects aimed at strengthening democratic institutions in different countries, so that civil society groups could benefit from similar experiences in the region.

HOW TO MAKE IT ALL WORK: STRUCTURAL SUGGESTIONS

17. (U) NGO representatives and academics like the idea of forming committees composed of civil society representatives from participating Arab countries to start the Foundation for Democracy, Democracy Assistance Group, and the Forum for the Future. They say it is important that these representatives be independent of their governments, but enjoy broad trust among their constituents. However, the challenge will be determining participation. They warn that identifying appropriate activists could inadvertently spur individual competition and jealousies between community leaders. To avoid this common problem, one solution might be to include a wide gathering of civil society representatives, possibly chosen by independent but outside organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy or the German foundation Stiftungen, which have experience and contacts in the region. This large gathering could elect a smaller regional steering committee of civil society representatives, which could set regional goals, brainstorm, coordinate funding and oversee the screening and selection of project proposals.

18. (U) One academic said it is essential that the reform program have measurable indicators so it does not devolve into a tool that enhances the (undesirable) status quo or that the reform effort stalls at the initial dialogue stage. Obviously, dialogue is essential to make connections and start the ball rolling, but the initiative will have to identify and empower specific means and tools for change to maintain momentum. Clear criteria defining progress would help ensure that projects translate into real reform (and societal progress).

ALL ROADS LEAD BACK TO PALESTINE (AND IRAQ)

19. (U) Activists worry that low USG credibility in the Middle East and ongoing turmoil in Iraq and the West Bank/Gaza will continue to hinder even a G-8 backed initiative. One warned that many regional leaders will try to use Iraq and Palestine as an excuse not to deal with reform in their countries. For the badly needed reform efforts to succeed, the people, according to our interlocutors, must be convinced that the U.S. is committed to a just solution to the conflicts, and they must see a sincere effort underway to fight what many perceive as anti-Arab and anti-Islam feelings/activities in the West. Failure to do so, according to our Jordanian contacts, will only increase extremism in the region and make the G-8's reform efforts infinitely more difficult in the long run.

COMMENT

10. (U) Our NGO and civil society interlocutors in this project -- many of whom met with U/S Grossman in March to discuss the GMEI -- provided positive and concrete suggestions not colored by a political message. That said, all pointed to low U.S. credibility on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iraq as the main obstacles to wide acceptance of the much-needed GMEI. We note that the positive and constructive reaction from Embassy contacts -- some of whom are interested in USG funding for their own related democracy and civil society projects -- is not representative of most Jordanians, who we expect would calibrate their reaction more closely with the negative political climate in the region.

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